

Our Founding Fathers

During the upcoming summer there will be lots of commemorative events about the War of 1812. Throughout the celebrations the usual clichés will be spouted about *'our two democracies'*, *'the longest undefended border in the world'*, *'similar values'*, etc. The dreary patina of government sponsored history lessons will hide any real discussions of why the two countries fought so hard against each other for so long. The truth is that there have been profound and significant differences in our societies from their very founding in 1783. There is no more striking contrast than the two men who were instrumental in creating the modern versions of our countries.

Let us take the principal U.S. founding father: George Washington. The customary defence of men like Washington is that they were typical of their time. His apologists say things like, *"Yes, he was a slave owner. Yes, his views of the Presidency seemed a little too much like a 'King of the United States'. And yes, he endorsed acts of ethnic cleansing and genocidal cruelty against the natives of the Ohio River valley. But you know most people of the 18th century had far more reactionary views, and Washington and the other founding fathers were actually far more progressive than their times."*

Not only is this defence false generally, for by the 1770s there were lots of people who considered slavery and massacres of the natives appalling cruelties (Edmund Burke, Jonathan Swift, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, et al.) but specifically some of the British generals who fought against the Americans were far more progressive and civil minded than Washington or his supporters.

There is one particular man whose name is almost synonymous with Ottawa – Guy Carleton. Carleton was a true renaissance man and someone, who in Canadian style has been nearly forgotten, yet we owe him much. A comparison between the two men shows how much Canadians have ceased to remember about why two wars were fought between the western inhabitants of North America in 1776 and 1812.

The first point of difference is in their treatment of the Roman Catholic population of Quebec. Carleton made a specific point of recognizing the rights of the inhabitants of Quebec to practice their own religion. He established this principle despite his own family background (he was a Protestant from the North of Ireland), but also against considerable opposition from the leaders of the independence movement of the then-thirteen American Colonies.

It is difficult to overstate the anti-Catholicism of most of the American Founding Fathers. John Adams was typical in his claims of a religion that held human nature *"chained fast for ages in a cruel, shameful and deplorable servitude"*. In ten of the American Colonies of the time, Catholics were not allowed to hold office, in all but one Catholic schools were banned and in Virginia, Washington's own district, Catholic priests were arrested if they tried to enter. In fact, Carleton's toleration of Catholicism in Canada, was one of the single biggest reasons for the war between the colonies and Britain.

To be fair, George Washington seems to have been an exception to this general attitude and he urged his armies when invading Canada to be tolerant to the inhabitants “*to look with Compassion upon their Errors without insulting them.*”

However, the only recorded meeting between Carleton and Washington was symptomatic of some of the other differences that would define our countries. Carleton was ordered to clean up the mess made by Cornwallis and the other surrendering British generals. He went to New York to supervise the evacuation of the Loyalists. The war was essentially over and little remained but to surrender the once staunchly monarchist city to the new American government in October 1783.

However, in the spring of 1783, an angry Washington demanded a meeting with Carleton. We know much about their confrontation for the papers of both men and their aides at the meeting all agree. The main problem was that as far as Washington was concerned Carleton was stealing his property. Carleton and his men were going about New York contacting any black person who had assisted their army and getting them out of the country by ship to Canada. Most of this group were escaped slaves who had fought against the American army for their own freedom. They were huddled in miserable refugee camps all across city trying to hide from roving bands of slave catchers. At the meeting, Carleton listened carefully to Washington’s demand that the slaves be returned and then politely refused him. In Carleton’s words, returning the slaves would be against ‘*the national honour*’.

Carleton did not help the slaves escape to make money. He helped them because it was the right thing to do. But his counterpart, George Washington had a direct monetary involvement in the affair, several of his own slaves had escaped their captivity at Mount Vernon and had fled to New York. Carleton was able to get them, and over three-thousand other people to freedom. Lawrence Hill’s novel *The Book of Negroes* is about this event, but really it was the *Schindler’s List* of the 1700s.

Let us be clear, if they had remained in the United States, they would have been victims of one of the most evil systems of indentured labour the world has even seen. It was partly for this system that Washington and much of the southern U.S. states fought against Britain. It is this type of system that Canada has always stood against. It was the reason that our leaders abolished slavery before much of the rest of the world. For four-score-and-seven years after the meeting between Carleton and Washington the very name of our country was a beacon of hope for tens-of-millions of enslaved people in the southern United States. They spoke the word *Canada* as the indigenous of Latin America spoke the words *El Dorado*, a near-mythical place where cruel masters could not reach them and real winds of freedom blew. Conscientious historians will assert, with reason, that the relations between blacks and whites in Canada were not a smooth ride. But whatever the justified criticism they were far better than the systematic, industrial-scale cruelty south of the border and, in part, we have men like Carleton to thank. We should not forget them, or our principles, when we remember the war of 1812.

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